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WILL SEMANTICS HELP.

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DEPENDENCE UPON SYMBOLS HAS LONG BEEN THE MARK OF CIVILIZED MAN. ALTHOUGH THE MAJORITY OF US HAVE LITTLE TROUBLE IDENTIFYING AND EVALUATING THE REFERENTS OF PHYSICAL SYMBOLS, WE ARE LESS SURE WHEN DEALING WITH THE MORE SUBTLE TYPE OF SYMBOLS CALLED WORDS. WE KNOW THAT A WORD'S MEANING MAY VARY ACCORDING TO SPEAKER, WRITER, LISTENER, READER, OR SITUATION, BUT FEW OF US WERE TRAINED TO DETECT FACT FROM FICTION AND TO ADVISE OTHERS ABOUT THIS DISTINCTION. NEVERTHELESS, WE, AS ENGLISH TEACHERS, MUST BE OUR STUDENTS' INTERPRETERS OF THE WORLD THAT WORDS STAND FOR, AND, THEREFORE, TEACHING ONLY GRAMMAR AND RHETORIC IS INSUFFICIENT. SINCE TOMORROW'S CRITICS ARE IN OUR CLASSROOMS TODAY, LET US TEACH THEM ABOUT SEMANTICS AND THE SYMBOLIC PROCESS, AND SO PROVIDE THEM WITH THE LINGUISTIC INSIGHT TO HANDLE THE PROBLEMS COMMON TO ALL MEDIA. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 43 (MARCH 1954), 130-34, 46.) (MM)

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Will Semantics Help?[1]

RICHARD CORBIN[2]

"When I use a word," said Humpty Dumpty [to Alice], "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

How many "would-be" Humpty Dumpties are there in this audience? I say "would-be," because I assume that all of us like to believe in the comforting illusion that we always "say what we mean and mean what we say." Of course, sooner or later, by one means or another, the treacherous character of this illusion is brought home to most of us, and with a proper humility we confess our verbal sins. We have to admit that very rarely do our words mean all that we intend them to mean, and, on the other hand, that a great many times our words carry tremendously more meaning than we realize or want them to.

Naturally, we teachers of English, whose special province is the study of words and their eccentric ways, never allow this illusion to victimize our thinking—or do we? That more than a few of us obviously do is rather curious, considering the notable store of information about the nature of words and meaning that is ours for the study—though it must be admitted that this information is rather well shielded from the eye of the casual seeker by the ominous label "Semantics" or, even worse, "Semasiology."

The other day, while preparing this talk, I asked a friend, an advertising man with our local newspaper and a person I had always considered well informed, what help, if any, semantics has been to him in his work. His response was rather disconcerting: "Semantics? Oh, yes, semantics. Something to do with the Jews, hasn't it?" Ironically, a good part of my friend's work each day is in an important area of semantic inquiry—the effect of words and their meanings upon human behavior, and vice versa.

At the outset, let me offer a friendly warning to any of you who recognize in yourselves an antisemantic—not anti-Semitic—bias such as was manifest in Humpty Dumpty. For it is rumored in the *Revised Mother Goose for the TV Age* that Humpty did not fall, as reported in earlier editions, but was in fact deliberately shoved from his wall. The chief suspect, according to the unofficial files of the Los Angeles Police Department, is a psychotic symbol that resented certain contextual abuses heaped upon it by the victim. Investigators, reconstructing the crime, theorize that in a fit of passion the as yet unidentified symbol, gaining access to the wall by offering a forged referent, tumbled the unsuspecting victim from his worldy eminence, then lost itself in the passing stream of argot.

You are advised, therefore, if you spot a word with suspicious tendencies to report it immediately to "Bromicide," and it will be placed under close surveillance

[1] A talk delivered before the meeting of the High School Section of the National Council of Teachers of English, Los Angeles, November 28, 1953.

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by the "Current English Forum." This is your simple duty as members of the NCTE. Obviously, we cannot hope to maintain the even tenor of our ways as teachers of English if criminally intentioned words run loosely about with multiple meanings and questionable referents, tumbling our more prominent Humpty Dumpties on their heads.

But these are but wild and whirling words, my lords. If there is a message hiding in this initial nonsense, which I doubt, it is supposed to be this: that a great many of us get ourselves and others into a great deal of trouble because we don't understand how our words and our minds operate in communicating thought. We teachers of English spend a good deal of our time polishing the spelling, the pronunciation, the syntax, of our boys and girls. Do we devote a comparable effort to the more essential business of showing them how language works? If their speech and writing are mechanically flawless, are we likely to take time to remark the prejudice, the single-valued judgment, the glittering generality, the runaway abstraction, the twisted metaphor, that underlie the polished surface?

We show no concern with these matters, partly, I suspect, because we haven't the time in our overloaded classes to stir up new and demanding problems. But the real reason goes deeper than that. Most of us have not, ourselves, been trained to detect and to offer helpful advice to others about the repair of faulty thinking. Thus we are not entirely to blame if we send out into the world students who cannot distinguish fact from fiction, the Truth from the Big Lie. In our training as teachers of English, we were given many of the tools of our craft but not, unfortunately, the special tool needed for this pre-eminently important job. So, many of us dream of Thebes and Camelot and pine for the good old days when teaching English was a relatively simple matter: spelling on Mondays, *Silas Marner* on Tuesdays and Thursdays, grammar on Wednesdays, and perhaps oral English on Fridays. And some of us, possibly, in Cheevian frustration, scratch our heads and keep on thinking, and a few cough and call it fate—and keep on drinking.

Dependence upon symbols has been the mark of civilized man through the centuries. We have come to intrust our fortunes and our lives often to incomprehensibly complex symbols. Our governments, our economic, moral, and social orders, would collapse without them. Not all these symbols, of course, point heavenward. Many are false and dangerous symbols, intended to lure us backward and down: the swastika, the Red Star, the gold-plated football. Fortunately, the majority of us have little trouble spotting and sensibly evaluating the referents of these and many more of the glamorous physical symbols that surround us.

We are not so sure of ourselves, though, when we have to deal with the more subtle type of symbols called "words." It is clear to the most casual observer that the meaning attached to the word "McCarthy" by one good citizen may not square at all with the meaning attached to it by another. The teacher who speaks so knowingly of "success" to her thirty pupils will, if she investigates, discover thirty different meanings of the word, and none identical with her own. Millions of Americans are startled to read in their morning papers of a well-intentioned lady in Indiana who finds new and ugly depths of meaning in the romantic old symbol "Robin Hood." Most of the same readers are not at all disturbed to find on an adjoining page a

warning from another citizen that we Americans may have to discard our symbol "democracy" and invent another for its place, since the Communists have so successfully twisted its meaning for the peoples who graze hungrily outside the democratic fold.

Unless we understand, and teach our children to understand, the process by which men's minds create symbols and then in turn are shaped by them, we will have to continue the uneven struggle against the awful power of the misused word. If the world of words is sinking fast into a condition of anarchy, as some suggest, or into a state of tyranny, as others say, it will certainly not be saved by the teaching of grammar and rhetoric alone. Indeed, some of the biggest lies of recent history have been grammatically faultless and rhetorically brilliant. I do not speak against the importance of grammar and rhetoric when I suggest that it is urgent for us teachers of English to equip our boys and girls with an understanding of the semantics of language. In this fateful final half of the twentieth century, we must be more than teachers of words; we must be interpreters of the world they stand for.

But I am getting a long way from my subject. What has all this to do with television? For my topic, according to the program in your hands, is the question "Will Semantics Help in the Teaching of English at the Beginning of the TV Age?" Frankly, I approach this subject with a strange uneasiness. The "TV Age"! Is this epithet more appropriate than any other for our times? Will historians of the future find it more truly descriptive of this decade than, say, the label "Antibiotic Age"? the "Age of the Uneasy Truce"? the "Age of Statistics"? or even the "Age of Public School Quackery"?

Only yesterday, it seems, we spoke in sepulchral tones of the problem of "teaching English for the Atomic Age." Has the time now come to file away in our commodious pedagogical archives the conscience-searing units on Hiroshima and related chaos that have occupied us for the last eight years? How many worn and torn curriculum committees have labored faithfully in the waning light of how many afternoons trying to keep up with the popular demand for units and syllabi and statements of aims appropriate to each new ephemeral slogan or label? Now again, it seems, Clio has audited her accounts. In her files the "Atomic Age" has joined the "Return to Spiritual Values," "One World," the "Fascist Threat," and others almost forgot. At the top of a new page of her ledger she has printed in round bold letters "The TV Age."

Naturally, English curriculums that did their share in helping us to regain "normalcy" in the 1930's; to sell bonds, collect scrap, and defeat our enemies in the early 1940's; to make our people world-minded in the late 1940's; and, more recently, to help our students to learn to live in an atom-conscious world and like it—naturally, these varied programs are not now adequate to meet the latest assault upon our national peace of mind, an assault led by cadres of grimacing lady wresters, grinning hearts-of-gold hucksters, and deadpan detectives, supported by shock units of marching, chorusing cigarettes and waltzing, talking beer cans. Symbols of the proposed new age?

What I am trying to imply—with too heavy a note of irony, probably—is my reluctance to accept a new label or slogan in my teaching every time the wind veers. That labels are useful in historical description is clear. That slogans are dear

to the human heart and that we must therefore learn to live with them is also clear. But it is one thing to live with words and to shape them to our ends, and quite another to let them shape us. It seems to me time for teachers of English, of all teachers, to stop tailoring programs to fit labels and slogans and to look earnestly, instead, for some of the common denominators of language in thought and action, to search for some common denominators (and I don't necessarily mean "lowest common denominators") that will help our boys and girls to solve not one but a succession of their and the world's problems.

What are these common denominators, or "fundamentals," if you are not averse to grabbing the bull by the horns? Do any of us question the value of fundamentals in gaining mastery of any subject, including the mastery of English? Here, perhaps, is the place for a brief demonstration of a semantic principle. Let us assume that we all agree that fundamentals are essential. But now suppose we were each to turn to his seatmate and discuss for the next hour what we mean specifically by the "fundamentals of English." Is there any need to theorize about the probable results? You have been through it already, most of you, hundreds of times in frustrating faculty and curriculum-planning meetings. We can agree absolutely on the need for teaching fundamentals, but how many of our faculties ever honestly reach agreement on what they mean by that? Thus we teachers have come to treat the word "fundamentals" with a circumspection that the layman—who knows with certainty what it means—seldom accords it. So, you see, without even being formally introduced to the study of semantics, you have perhaps arrived through experience at a partial appreciation of one of its most important principles—the fact that meaning is dynamic and changing, a product of the user's particular experience with the thing a word stands for. How much more comfortable our lives would be, as teachers, if some of our critics who hurl the word "fundamentals" at us with such self-assurance could share our knowledge of this principle. It seems superfluous to moralize that in our classrooms now we are readying our tomorrow's critics. By all means let us train them to be critics, but let's make of them critics who appreciate the weight and worth of words.

When a forest becomes too thickly planted, most of the trees become stunted and uncertain in their growth. I suggest what many others already have: that the English program is becoming—has become—overgrown. We have accepted more and more responsibilities, like the good Joes we are (you know, more good-natured and adaptable than the math or science or "education for citizenship"—that's a new semantic switch for "social studies" in New York State—teachers with their strait-jacket syllabi!). Any item coming down the educational turnpike that bears the slightest resemblance to communication or literature is shunted our way. I suggest that we teachers of English get a little tougher-minded and refuse to accept so benignly some of these orphans of the curriculum. Television, for instance, is not *our* special problem. We do not need to *teach* our pupils to look at television, to listen to radio, to look at motion pictures, or to receive sense impressions from any other of the mediums of mass communication.

We will use these devices in our English classes, naturally, as helpful means to an end. But our main job respecting any or all of them, it seems to me, is to teach our boys and girls about words and meaning

—about the symbolic process, the common denominator of all mediums of communication. If we do this halfway effectively, we need have less concern about the judgment they will show in arriving at understanding and appreciation in television or any other medium. A basic tool that we can furnish and that will serve them well is, I suggest, a knowledge of semantics.

Semantics can hardly be regarded as a new field of inquiry. Twenty-five centuries ago, Lao-tzu began *The Way of Life* with this statement, that might well have issued from almost any of our modern professional semanticists:

> In the beginning of heaven and earth there were no words,
> Words came out of the womb of matter;
> And whether a man dispassionately
> Sees to the core of life
> Or passionately
> Sees the surface,
> The core and the surface
> Are essentially the same,
> Words making them seem different
> Only to express appearance.
> If name be needed, wonder names them both.

Wonder had not yet created the term, but, as you can see, Lao-tzu can be regarded as a pioneer semanticist. That is, he was concerned with the nature of the meanings of words—but as a philosopher, not as a scientist. In every century since, great thinkers have continued to explore the nature of words. To most of them it has seemed clear that of all the tools provided man for survival and ultimately for victory over his hostile environment, language—the symbolization of experience—is the most essential, and the least understood.

In spite of the perennial interest of the world's great minds in this subject, ordinary men have never been greatly disturbed by the hidden workings of the words they used. At least they have never been notably disturbed until our own time. Now, suddenly, all kinds of men in every part of the world have become concerned, in varying degrees, with the nature and workings of language—some from evil motives, some from mercenary motives, but many from a more honorable motive, the desire to communicate what is in their hearts to those who have never known democratic freedom, either of word or of thought.

Wherever you turn today you are likely to find men giving semantics their respectful attention. Leading businessmen, doctors, lawyers, dentists, diplomats, writers, ex-Presidents—they are all concerned, as evidenced by the numerous articles in their journals and by their public utterances, with the impact of words upon their affairs. Strangely, among teachers we find a curious disinterest, a reluctance to rank the study of meaning above the study of the inflectional vagaries of English words.

Of all the insights that Carl Sandburg has given me into the epic character of Lincoln, none has so deepened my understanding of the genius of the man as the brief chapter x of the *Prairie Years* that sets forth so vividly the nature of the language used on the Illinois, or any, frontier and that ends:

> Words like "independent" bothered the boy. He was hungry to understand the meanings of words. He would ask what "independent" meant and when he was told the meaning he lay awake nights thinking about the meaning of the meaning of "independent." Other words bothered him, such as "predestination." He asked the meaning of that and lay awake hours at night thinking about the meaning of the meaning.

From Lao-tzu to Lincoln to the boys and girls in your third-period English

[*Concluded on p. 146*]

class (even if they happen to be selected slow learners) there is an instinctive human appetite for meaning and for the meaning of meanings. Since the scientific linguists of the past few decades have provided us with many easy approaches to the study of semantics, we teachers of language will have no ready alibi if we fail to translate their findings into workable teaching material.

If I have seemed, Humpty Dumpty–like, to evade the programed issue by making my topic mean just what I chose it to mean, it was, as perhaps you have sensed, because I do not view the so-called "TV Age" with special apprehension. Television is a hard and present fact; but so are the *New York Daily News*, Hollywood Class B pictures, crime comics, low-grade pocket books, and the "Voice of Moscow." Somehow we have to deal effectively with them all in the teaching of our youth. If we must choose and set up a slogan to help us chart our way, it seems to me that for the last twenty years and for many years to come, above all else we have been and will be living in an "Age of Mass Communication," of which television is but a single medium. Our job is to provide young people with the linguistic insights they will need to handle the problems common to all existing mediums and others not yet discovered in such a way that individual freedom of word, thought, and action will not disappear from the earth, either by 1984 or by any other year of history yet to come.

Several of our poets in times past have noted, "The pen is mightier than the sword." It remains for us, with our scientific know-how, to prove that words honestly and intelligently used are more effective than atomic missiles.

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